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EXTENSION INFORMATION PROBLEMS*

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We are faced with the job of building an emergency extension information program that will assure victory for all our allies in the mobilization of agricultural defense.

Just what is the best strategy to employ I am frank to admit I do not know. And I am sure that YOU ALL would say the same thing. That is precisely why we are privileged to be in Washington this week for this history-making meeting of the Extension Editor Advisory Committee.

Devastating enemies stalk the premises of all extension forces in these United States and our Territories. Like the Four Horsemen they ride about bringing destruction and havoc while we editors stand by and ponder whether or not to use an editorial atomic weapon. Our Four Horsemen are:

1. Confusion.
2. Misinterpretation.
3. Disorientation.
4. Procrastination.

Freedom from these shackling and deterring foes must be our unequivocal goal. We can't depend on any Army logistics to assist us in destroying these editorial enemies, but we can rely on discussion, argument, judgment, experience, and planning to supply us with the facts needed to bring about understanding and harmony on the editorial fronts.

Let's consider each one of the enemies individually to see how we can map out his destruction. Don't we editors need to stand off from our jobs and take a look at our own bad maneuvers? This CONFUSION, if we might extend the analogy, is a two-way road. Would your faces be RED, and I do mean red, if an editorial Kefauver queried, Quo Vadis?

Probably never before in the history of agriculture has there been such a state of confusion facing all groups. How much have we editors done to clear things up for the people back home? How many of us have used the needed psychology and philosophy to educate our people so that they could better understand the DESIRED correlation among agricultural agencies? How many of us have felt it our sole duty just to give out spot news and to disseminate the how-to-do type information, neglecting thereby to explain WHY the how-to-do was so important? Rural people should be enabled to understand better the features of stabilization, civilian defense, Point 4, and a host of other things that the Nation is undertaking in the struggle that is going on.

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We are an educational agency. I refer, of course, to agricultural extension service, and we editors are saddled with a job of telling and selling the people on what our defense mobilization responsibility is. Your syllabus and mine must be replete with outlines of studies of all phases of this program whether they be administered by A.B.C., P.D.Q., or Q.T.! Our thesis, never let us forget, is AGRICULTURE.

We are called the educational arm of the United States Department of Agriculture and the land-grant colleges. We are academicians, well-qualified ones who some day will be given sabbatical leave so we can have our coronary thrombosis off the campus! But, as academicians, how well do we function? Let's clear up this confusion in our own minds and then set about to stamp out the confusion which exists in the minds of our constituents -- this confusion which is like a contagious disease and quite as devastating!!

And now enemy number two — MISINTERPRETATION.

It is not my purpose to charge you with the willful misinterpretation of facts but unquestionably we are chargeable with the fault, though we are not solely to blame. We got directives issued for the Nation at large and, either owing to ignorance or to a lack of industry, we do not have adequate information to make intelligible interpretations. We know, for instance, that the country must produce 16 million bales of cotton, and each of us, if we labor in the Cotton Belt, is aware of his State's quota so we can intelligently interpret the cotton story for our people. We could just as well use the production of corn, or wheat, or potatoes, depending on the section of the country we are from. These are positive pictures. I could show you NEGATIVE ones that would be staggering.

Our purpose is to promote more efficient production, better farms, happier homes, and all that is involved in those aims. The primary interests of the farmers are to be good providers and successful heads of families. Both the farmer and the farm woman want a prosperous and happy life. These individual interests coincide with national interests of maintaining an adequate food, feed, and fiber supply and a stable agriculture.

If we accept this as our premise and set about to fortify ourselves with the information needed for complete understanding, then we can certainly whip this enemy and thereby free ourselves from its octopus-like hold.

And now the third enemy — DISORIENTATION.

Recognition of the need for doing something doesn't necessarily imply complete orientation. First there must be an understanding and that can only come about from a serious study of the facts at hand. Then, even then, there is a lag between understanding and action both on our part and on the part of the people whom we serve. In this period of emergency we are called upon to undertake the job of acquainting rural people with many programs that seem to be essential in the public interest. The sooner we orient ourselves the quicker we can advise our people.

The rub is that information coming from national sources is necessarily directed to the public in general. If we are to use it in our practical service, it must be adapted first to agriculture and second to the understanding of the people we are endeavoring to aid. The appeals must be in terms of local interest.

That isn't an easy job. Extension editors are busy people. They have more than they can do in the production and home economics fields. They are understaffed, and so the orientation almost gets bypassed.

It then becomes mandatory on our part to work up a definite program that will help us to be better orienters! This is a challenge that we cannot afford to ignore.

And last, but not least — PROCRASTINATION.

According to Archy and Mehitabel — procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday!

We fellow editors are often guilty of procrastination. But we have no monopoly on the dereliction. This fault we can certainly ascribe to human nature at large and so we can little afford to point the accusing finger at any other individual or any agency. Being fully aware of this I am sure that you're willing to admit that we do our share of procrastinating. Procrastination is an insidious enemy that we must rid ourselves of. But as Ruth McEnery Stuart says, "We ain't by ourselves in dat, in dat, no we ain't by ourselves in dat."

We in Louisiana got much help from Washington. It is not a case of too little — but one of TOO LATE.

We don't know whether we should lay the cause at the door of procrastination, but we recognize the fact that failure to receive information on time destroys our most effective work.

If I must be specific I can do so and then let the chips fall where they may. As Barbara Frietchie remarked, "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head."

Now I'm not intending to fight the Civil War again, for I don't think that the cases I'm going to relate are indigenous to the South, but they are things I can speak about authoritatively.

Because of conditions brought about by our Nation's being at partial war, shall we say, it became the expedient thing to advise the people to grow more food for themselves. It was not to be a garden campaign to frighten the people but an expanded program of what we in extension were and had been engaged in since "the memory of man runneth not to the contrary." Long after our folks had planted their gardens in the deep South, we held a meeting, calling all allied agricultural agencies together and we heard pep talks and we got inspired. But it was too late. Had we received such directives in December or early January we could have planted a garden on many more vacant lots in Louisiana.

Again: Recently we celebrated National Home Demonstration Week. We got to work locally long before the approaching dates. We knew we had to take our turn in getting material mimeographed, we had to assemble and distribute material, and yet from Washington 10 days before the opening of the week we got material to augment our local publicity! It was good material. There was plenty of it. No, it was not a matter of too little but too late.

If this be insubordination, then I, too, may just fade away!

Fellow editors, this is our four-point program as I see it.

What can we do to work out some general constructive recommendations to agencies and to fellow editors to help us do the kind of information job that is expected of us?

Looking at these things, as we must, from the point of view of a specific press release, a radio talk, a leaflet, a house organ, a photograph, exhibit, or slide film, what do we need from Washington and what can we do back home on our own to interpret the national programs needed for clearer understanding by the people?

History will place its evaluation on us by the way we meet this challenge. That is a terrifying and sobering thought, but I guess it is as it should be. For certainly ours is a big responsibility, and each of us, I know, views this colossal task with humility and some timidity.

The 64-dollar question in my mind is: Gentlemen, are we aggressors or appeasers?